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PNEU/WES

**Commentary on
Primary Education in
England**

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PARENTS' NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL UNION AND
THE WORLD-WIDE EDUCATION SERVICE

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Comments on HMI's Survey of Primary Education

THE PARENTS' NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL UNION issued a statement on the Great Debate on education initiated by the Prime Minister in 1976. The issue of a Survey of Primary Education in England¹ prepared by HM Inspectorate offers a further opportunity for comment on the state of education by PNEU and its overseas section, the World-wide Education Service.

The impact on teachers and others in education of this important study of current practice in state primary schools was reduced because an industrial dispute caused a minimal number of copies to be available. All the more need, therefore, for a commentary on it if thereby interest is created in this important document. Published eleven years after the Central Advisory Council's Report on Primary Education—known, after its Chairman, as the Plowden Report—it removes any misapprehensions there might be about how junior pupils are really taught and makes valuable suggestions for improving the quality of teaching.

The Report in Summary

The Survey covered no less than 542 schools in England and Wales and concentrated its attention on the seven, nine and eleven year olds in them. The main areas studied were school organisation; teaching methods; aspects of the curriculum such as content and range and attainment levels.

The inspectors introduce a new term which may well come into more general use. It is 'match', the relationship between the level of difficulty of the work and the child's ability to do it. Unfortunately they report that 'where work was not reasonably matched to children's capabilities, this was because it was insufficiently demanding'. The more able children in a class were the worst off for such children 'were more likely than other children to be doing work that was too easy for them'. Another conclusion is that greater specialisation by teaching staff is necessary if subjects are to be taught better. The Survey indicates that schools will be forced to move towards more complicated teaching arrangements including specialisation and team teaching, whilst they retain the institution of a class teacher who has close personal contact with each child. This link has been the strongest argument for the *status quo* in primary schools. For too long the idea has prevailed that only subjects like music and physical education called for specialist teachers. Now we know that maths, science and even English need teachers with special knowledge.

As the Report states:

'No blanket solution is being suggested here. The critical points are: can class teachers manage to provide all that is necessary for particular classes? If not, what must be done to help them to manage satisfactorily and in a way that is, on balance, advantageous?'

¹Primary Education in England. (HMSO, 1978; £3.50.)

This problem is one of several pointed out in the Survey—poor 'match', for instance—which take on a more ominous appearance when it is realised that these weaknesses could persist longer now that so many areas have organised into middle schools with pupils up to twelve or thirteen. There should be an early follow-up to the present survey to assess the strengths and weaknesses in middle schools.

With this conclusion goes another—that in 75 per cent of the schools teachers with special responsibility posts had no noticeable effect on the work of the school. While it is the case that many such posts are awarded for other than teaching duties, this alarming conclusion requires further study, if only on the grounds that value for this expenditure may not be obtained. The lack of academic direction in schools has been commented on adversely by Professor Denis Lawton in a recent study of the curriculum.¹

This kind of problem is admittedly more difficult to solve in smaller schools but teachers in primary schools both small and large tend to leave curricular policy and even the preparation of syllabuses to the head. There is nothing to correspond to the head of department found in secondary schools except in the largest schools and, as the Survey shows, the mere existence of these posts does not make them effective.

The Survey confirms Professor Neville Bennett's enquiry² which concluded that most teachers employ a traditional style of teaching, called by the Inspectors 'didactic' teaching methods. The one-fifth who used a combination of 'didactic' and 'exploratory' methods achieved better results in reading and mathematics. Only 5 per cent of children are taught by purely exploratory methods and they did least well and less was demanded of them. The use of 'didactic' teaching methods does not imply formality however since in most classes group or team work took place.

The Survey is able to demonstrate that standards of attainment in reading have not fallen and that teachers spend a great deal of time in teaching English and mathematics. But they state that standards could be improved and, in particular, that the more able children were inadequately catered for. Other weaknesses were found, particularly in science teaching.

Some Comments

While the claim that basic standards have declined in the country's primary schools is once again disproved by the Survey, no room is left for complacency. What is revealed is a paradox. Hard-working, conscientious teachers pursuing for the most part traditional teaching methods are not obtaining as good results as they ought.

Since the statistics of teaching methods show an overwhelming majority of teachers using conventional methods, critics who put the blame on 'free activity' teaching will now have to look elsewhere.

The inspectors can give only an indirect answer, since their purpose is to describe and not to explain. Modern teaching cannot be done successfully

¹*The End of the Secret Garden*, D. Lawton: Lecture at London University Institute of Education, November 1978.

²*Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress*, N. Bennett. (Open Books 1976.)

'across the board'. As class size appears to have little effect on results, another explanation must be sought: the increasing complexity of the task of teaching and a belated realisation that, given the educational standards and training of teachers, and given the requirements of subjects like English, mathematics and science, there is, to use the Inspectors' own term, an unsatisfactory match.

It is not surprising that such a position should exist in one basic subject, mathematics, for nearly half the students accepted for teaching training lack an O level 'pass' in mathematics, a subject which today is far more complex than ever. Teachers often do not know how they are to balance the claims of basic computation, practical exercises, calculating systems like Cuisenaire and, finally, mathematical concepts—the heart of new maths. Since all this may be new ground itself to them, picked up on a course during the training years, it is asking too much of many of them.

Another poorly taught subject, science, not only reveals the teachers' feelings of inadequacy to cope with it but also the very limited results of considerable efforts made in the past decade to stimulate science teaching. The Inspectors state that the ideas and materials produced by curricular development projects have had little impact on the majority of schools. This conclusion tallies with the Schools Council's own findings on much of its own work. It is important that in-service training should not only take place on a more thorough basis but that the reasons for the failure of much development work should be analysed in the hope of obtaining better results in the future.

The new concept of 'match' is likely to become a common part of educational vocabulary, especially now that the Department of Education's Assessment and Performance Unit is getting into its stride. To decide whether the match is satisfactory or not between a child or group of children and the degree of difficulty of the work requires experience and judgement; it is far from being a statistically calculated finding, as the APU will no doubt discover. However HM Inspectors have traditionally assessed the quality of the teacher and the pupils' work. 'Match' is, like M Jourdain's prose, something a good teacher has performed throughout her career.

They found only too often that work was insufficiently demanding and that with groups of able children the match was worse than with average and less able groups. This is a serious conclusion and suggests, as the Survey confirms, that teachers' expectations of their children are too low.

The reasons for this are complex—a tendency among teachers to aim at a middle range of ability, a lack of awareness of what the children in a class can achieve, a failure to maintain pupils' interest, even with some, a feeling that it is wrong to push children too hard. The reasons lie in the personality of teachers, their enthusiasm and, indeed, their mental and physical stamina. The psychological barrier of lack of confidence has to be borne in mind but, whatever the reasons, better pre- and in-service training and greater specialisation are essential.

Charlotte Mason's Principles and the Survey's Findings

So far, comments have been made in a general way. As the inheritor of a set of educational principles laid down a century ago by Charlotte Mason,

21p5pneu164

PNEU/WES is naturally interested to see how far these principles are relevant and applicable in the opinion of HM Inspectors. The precedent for this interest is the Plowden Report itself. Its conclusions that, when parents take an interest in their child's education, the child is likely to do well, that a home with books provides the best background for success in school, that a school should permit a child to develop as an individual, and so on, corresponded closely with those of this Victorian educationalist.

The Survey is not primarily concerned with principles but with description. Even so, good practice must arise from a sound basic belief, and the Survey sets out many points which believers in Masonian methods will not be surprised to find confirmed in schools today. Furthermore these findings have wide application since Charlotte Mason had in mind 'all children everywhere'.

Miss Mason's cardinal belief was that children must be treated as individuals with all the consequences which flow from that proposition. It is apparent from the Survey that, although teachers do approach their classes in this light, they do not always know how to deal with individual children's needs.

It is pleasing to find that nowadays 'children behave responsibly and cooperate with their teachers and with other children' in our primary schools. In the few cases of inattentiveness or poor progress, teachers have failed to provide work of a suitable level of difficulty. Children are taught to be considerate and their work covers an adequately wide curriculum, thus conforming to the Masonian principle that education is a discipline of mind and body. The atmosphere of school suits children but the Survey did not set out to attempt to relate school and its values to those of the home, a task beyond its scope.

The emphasis on teaching basic literacy and mathematics is also encouraging but the Survey has reservations about the limited choice and range of reading material given a child or of its written work. Wide reading is a requirement of Masonian theory. This gap extends to such vital material as atlases, maps and globes. Creative writing was not so pervasive in schools as it is often thought to be. Once again the abler children in each class come off worst, a theme which recurs throughout the Report.

'It was rare to find children presented with a writing task which involved presenting a coherent argument, . . . or making judgements . . . it could have been more regularly encouraged among the older and abler pupils.'

This is in line with Charlotte Mason's dictum that as they grow mature, children must learn to accept or reject ideas.

With mathematics as well, for children of high ability, the work was often too easy. All children need to use numbers in a variety of situations whilst they are actually *learning* the numbers. In Charlotte Mason's view, education was the science of relations and mathematical relationships nowadays form an increasingly important part of a child's life.

Another theme of the Survey—that many children are inadequately catered for, whether clever or not—echoes Miss Mason's belief that a child required 'much knowledge for the mind' and that children would respond better than might be expected.

21p6pneu164

The importance of observation as a vital part of training whether for science or environmental teaching has been stressed in the Masonian credo. Children should be trained to observe nature and record their findings from an early age. The Survey shows how lacking this discipline is in many schools today.

Great stress is laid in Masonian teaching upon aesthetic subjects by the study of great pictures, music and literature. It is nowadays allied to practical art and craft work. On the whole the schools involved in the Survey show up well, but poor results arise when there is insufficient guidance from the teacher.

Charlotte Mason's teachings were unequivocally based on a Christian foundation and in today's schools not only is there a religious content in the morning assembly, but also in class lessons where Christian precepts are seen as important ideas to be taught and put into practice, the Bible being the most common source of material.

It has to be recognised that state schools face acute problems with the numbers, often considerable, of children from different religious backgrounds or none at all. The Inspectors look forward to religious education being expanded to respond more fully to the challenge of living in a multi-faith society but they are silent on the possibility of schools existing in a religious vacuum.

The Survey states that

'It is vital that teachers should be knowledgeable in what they teach and . . . that they should be able to assess the performance of their pupils in terms of what they next need to be taught.'

Thus, a wise teacher will be acting on the precepts of Charlotte Mason as well as on those of other great educationalists, for he or she will create the right learning environment (preferably in cooperation with the home), will provide knowledge and encouragement, will teach progressively in relation to the needs and abilities of children and will see that each child's intellectual, moral and spiritual needs are met by offering the child a guide to self-management by way of the will and by way of the reason.

It is good to find that most teachers try to carry out these aims; less good that some fail to achieve what they ought.

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pneu/64

For Dr Thorley.

I dare not know the cost on my own initiative
you will know if it is of value, so I feel I should leave
the decision to you. I'm sorry I cannot stay to meet with you.
Tessa Fylen.

SPECIAL SUBJECT ESSAY

Name: **C. A. Joseph**

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of essay: **Makale House, Reigate
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No. of field of
study: *

6

Title: **The P. N. E. U. and general
education**

No. of words:

4,300

* "R" if 'research' topic